INVOLVING ABORIGINAL PEOPLE IN SUSTAINABLE FOREST MANAGEMENT

Canada’s forests have long played an integral role in meeting the cultural, spiritual and material needs of Aboriginal peoples. Encouraging more Aboriginal involvement in the forest sector benefits Canada’s sustainable forest management and helps to build strong Aboriginal communities.

Aboriginal and treaty rights are protected by Canada’s constitution, and this is increasingly reflected in forest policies and forest management practices. Aboriginal involvement in the land is being formally acknowledged through processes that include land claims, treaty making and treaty land entitlement.

About 80 per cent of Aboriginal communities are located in or near forested areas and their participation in forestry is growing. There are more opportunities for employment, contracting and business development, and forest companies are entering into a variety of partnerships with Aboriginal development corporations.

More than 800 Aboriginal communities are located in Canada’s forests, and about 1.4 million hectares (3.46 million acres) of reserve lands are suitable for resource uses such as forestry, hunting, trapping, fishing and gathering herbs and medical plants.

Until recently, Aboriginal involvement in forest products industries has revolved mainly around the provision of labor and harvested wood.

Canada’s forest vision addresses the fact that Aboriginal people are beginning to diversify their approach to forest-based development, including the development of non-timber forest products and Aboriginal tourism initiatives.

Government Support for Aboriginal Forestry

The importance of Aboriginal engagement in forestry is growing as more forest land is coming under Aboriginal control and management. Self-government agreements and treaty settlements have transferred control and management responsibilities to First Nations for almost 1.8 million hectares (4.45 million acres) of land across Canada, much of which is forested land.

Another trend is that more Aboriginal youth are working in forestry than ever before. The 2006 census shows that Aboriginal youth (age 15 to 24) constituted 17.6 per cent of the Aboriginal labour force in the forest sector, compared with 13.1 per cent for non-Aboriginal youth. The census also determined that 3.5 per cent of the Aboriginal labour force worked in the forest sector, compared with 1.8 per cent of the non-Aboriginal labour force.

There is also great involvement at the business development level as two thirds of self-employed Aboriginal workers reported participation in the forest sector (2006 census). What these trends reveal is an emerging forest-based economic opportunity for Aboriginal communities through partnership development, knowledge exchange/creation and project funding.

Canada’s federal government conducts initiatives and programs to help Aboriginal peoples increase their involvement in the forest sector. For example, the Aboriginal Forestry Initiative (AFI) is a new Government of Canada approach to foster enhanced Aboriginal participation in the competitive and sustainable transformation of Canada’s forest sector.

With a focus on economic development, the AFI empowers Aboriginal entrepreneurs in the forest sector, by serving as a knowledge centre, and to facilitate knowledge exchange and coordination of federal and other support to opportunity-ready Aboriginal forestry projects and partnerships.
Currently, these priority areas for Aboriginal economic development in forestry include:

- bioenergy
- services to industry and governments
- value-added wood products

**Building Partnerships**

Provincial and territorial governments across Canada are encouraging partnerships with Aboriginal communities. For example:

- In eastern Canada, the Innu Nation of Labrador is involved in a unique partnership with the government of the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador to implement a strategic forest management plan in an area that is under comprehensive land claim negotiations.
- In Quebec, the provincial government and the Cree Nation reached an historic agreement to continue joint development of the James Bay territory for a period of 50 years. The agreement provides increased economic and community development support for the Cree throughout the James Bay region. Notably, support will be provided for further development of the region’s hydroelectric power generation potential and for increased participation by the Cree in the planning and management of the region’s immense forest resources.
- Manitoba Conservation has initiated co-management agreements with Aboriginal organizations to share roles and responsibilities in addressing resource management issues. In Saskatchewan, following a reallocation of major forest licences, all new licences in the province must involve partnerships with Aboriginal businesses.
- In British Columbia, the provincial government is committed to increasing economic opportunities for First Nations in the forest sector by sharing forest revenues and increasing their share of the province’s allowable annual harvest, much of it through reallocation from forest companies. The survey findings show that, in general, the forestry industry and Aboriginal communities/companies across Canada have developed many positive and profitable relationships based on open communication, cross-cultural respect and innovative training programs.

The National Aboriginal Forestry Association also surveys its members, Aboriginal owned forestry companies, to determine their interests and areas of opportunity.


**Measuring Aboriginal Participation**

In 2007, Natural Resources Canada commissioned the Aboriginal Strategy Group to conduct a national survey of forest companies to determine the progress of Aboriginal participation in Canada’s forest sector.

Highlights of the survey included:

- A 75 per cent increase in Aboriginal economic and employment initiatives;
- A 100 per cent increase in co-management opportunities and an 80 per cent increase in partnerships;
- More training for Aboriginal staff, and training programs for local Aboriginal communities to increase capacity; and
- Training/mentoring opportunities for Aboriginal suppliers and contractors.

Complementary Knowledge

Aboriginal peoples, who have lived in harmony with their surroundings for centuries, have gained a deep understanding of how the components of the environment are interconnected. Increasingly, policy makers and planners recognize the value of this traditional knowledge—which emphasizes the inter-relationships between components of the environment and views humans as part of the natural environment, not simply as observers or controllers—as a valuable complement to science-based approaches to managing forests sustainably.